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UCFS marks expansion of Norwich health center

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Norwich, Conn. — United Community and Family Services could have chosen any day this week for a ground-breaking ceremony on a \$3.4 million expansion of its Edward and Mary Lou Lord Health Center on Town Street.

But Aug. 14 was special.

“In New London County, we see one (out of) every 14 people. And as we renovate our space here, we’re going to increase our capacity so we can see more people,” UCFS CEO Chuck Seeman said during a morning press conference introducing the plan to community leaders and stakeholders of the 136-year-old nonprofit.

Officials timed the announcement to coincide with National Health Center Week, which runs through Saturday. UCFS is one of 13 such agencies in Connecticut, but is the state’s only federally qualified health center “look-alike.”

That means it offers the same services as its counterparts, but without any of the federal money to offset expenses.

Evelyn Barnum, CEO of the Connecticut Health Center Association, said UCFS’s unique designation makes the work it does all the more impressive. According to statistics presented by UCFS, service delivery volume has jumped by 103 percent since 2006-07, while funding has increased by 15 percent over that same span.

“We’ve watched UCFS transform itself over and over and over again, anticipating needs and adding services,” Barnum said.

After Seeman’s press conference, more than 20 people walked into the cavernous space that was once home to Pagoda Chinese restaurant, where the first piece of drywall was smashed in with golden sledgehammers.

West Hartford-based MBH Architecture designed the center, while OR&L of Branford was hired as the contractor.

Construction on the project begins next week, and is expected to wrap up in June. Once finished, the clinic at 47-55 Town St. will nearly double capacity, bring 21 new health-care jobs to the region and create enough space for 24 more exam rooms.

Janette Edwards, manager of community benefits at The William W. Backus Hospital, said UCFS is one of its most significant partners, pointing to collaborations like Access to Care, which has linked nearly 500 uninsured people with a primary care provider since 2005.

“UCFS is a major component of Eastern Connecticut’s safety net, and a vital part of Backus on many fronts,” Edwards said. “We could not create such an impact working alone.”

In addition to Backus, UCFS also teams with Generations Family Health, the region’s other community health center, on a range of initiatives and programs. The Willimantic-based Generations stretches into Danielson and Putnam and logs more than 55,000 visits a year.

“The goal is to do preventive medicine to catch problems before they start,” said Judith Gaudet, manager of Generation’s Norwich branch. “And that’s why it’s really important to provide as many wrap-around services as we can.”

Generations employees are spending the week at several locations across its coverage area providing sun safety tips, diabetes education and nutritional advice.

Later this month, UCFS, Generations, Backus and Three Rivers Community College are partnering on a program to provide incoming college students with physicals and immunizations before classes start on Aug. 28.

Starting Oct. 1, open enrollment begins for Access Health CT — the state’s health insurance marketplace created in response to the federal Affordable Care Act

And while community health centers don’t receive funding from the exchange, officials say they will be key partners because of their patient pools.

Kathleen Tallarita, government affairs and outreach manager for Access Health CT, said employees at UCFS and other community health centers get training so they can answer insurance questions.

“We will be looping them in on that. They do wonderful work and people trust them,” she said. “Our goal is to get people insured, and this is just another medium to do that.”

Barnum said the influx of new patients and questions they’ll bring about finding a suitable plan means community health centers are readying to serve clients in new ways.

“This is just the beginning of changes in the health care landscape we’ll see in the year ahead, and today is just the beginning of changes we’re going to see at UCFS,” she said.

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